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Mexican Identity Beyond Labels, Beyond Borders

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ABSTRACT

According to the U.S. census, "Mexican" is labeled as an ethnic or national identity, not a racial identity. To understand more about the meaning and experience behind Mexican identity, I conducted 13 interviews with people who self-identify as Mexican. I found a disconnect between how people self-identify and how they situate themselves within categories that differ from their understandings of race. People described what it means to be Mexican through culture and shared peoplehood regardless of country of origin. They shared experiences being racialized in the U.S., but did not have a similar pattern in defining what race or ethnicity mean.

"Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul – not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean; neither animal respects borders" (Anzaldúa 1999:84).

As Gloria Anzaldúa states, Mexican identity is a state of soul; it is fluid and extends beyond labels and beyond borders. Like the ocean, it cannot be confined within categories, territories, or rigid structures. Mexican identity cannot easily be defined, especially when definitions derive from white western epistemology. Anzaldúa captures the complexity in how individuals understand and experience this identity. However, those complexities and the meanings behind identity are lost in the broader debate as to whether Mexican implies a racial, ethnic, or national category. According to U.S. census categories and common understands of race and ethnicity, "Mexican" is labeled as an ethnic category or a national identity and in doing so, the racial aspect behind Mexican identity is missed. Such definitions and explanations of identity are narrow and do not allow for individuals who identify as racially Mexican to define their own identities. However, when discussions open a space for communities to speak for themselves, complexities and nuances begin to emerge.

Identities are social constructions, but they are also social realities (Bonilla-Silva 1999). They are forces that shape individual's everyday lives, their understanding of themselves, how they relate to others, and establish a sense of group membership and boundaries. For participants in this research, cultural ties were the basis for their sense of shared peoplehood, belonging, and the meaning behind Mexican identity. Culture can

indicate ethnic identity, but race is also a major component of Mexicans' experiences within the United States.

When looking at the meaning of race, ethnicity, and nationality, it is evident that participants' experiences do not fit the established frameworks that were created by others. Conceptualizing race and ethnicity through individuals' frameworks would provide a better understanding of the complexity and diversity behind identity rather than attempting to fit experiences within categories that do not reflect Mexican or Latin@experiences.[1] There is no unifying Mexican identity nor are there boundaries for identification. The focus should not lie on rigid classifications, but on the diverse narratives that comprise Mexican identity.

Along with recognition as a national identity, Mexican is categorized as an ethnicity in the United States and people are able to identify within any of the accepted U.S. racial categories. In terms of racial and ethnic identities, there is a disconnect between how individuals self-identify and how they self-categorize as they navigate the U.S. census and attempt to situate within categories that differ from their own perceptions and understandings of race. Constructions of race and ethnicity are different in Mexico than in the U.S. because the rigid U.S. categories are not employed. Race is perceived as a color spectrum and differences are explained through cultural differences between indigenous and the mestiz@ majority (Ortiz and Telles 2012; Villarreal 2010). These understandings of race are evident in participants' responses, but racial and ethnic identity is further complicated when U.S. Census categories are presented.

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[1] In Spanish, most nouns are gendered. I use @ to combine the feminine "a" and the masculine "o" to represent gender neutrality and inclusivity.

The meaning of Mexican identity is described through cultural elements and a sense of shared peoplehood regardless of country of origin. Although identities are shaped by social factors and interactions Mexican identity is understood as a social reality and more than a label for identification or group membership; they are identities whose deep meanings and attachments are shaped by familial ties and notions of shared history and culture (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Cornell and Hartman 2007). Mexican nationality and ties to nation are not dependent on Mexican citizenship. Ties to nation are not defined through geographic territory, but through shared values, histories, and culture (Connor 1994; Smith 1999). Being Mexican is perceived as being rooted deeper than citizenship because the factors that shape national ties transcend borders.

I set out to better understand what Mexican identity means to different people and how they understand their identity. How do those who identify as Mexican define their racial, ethnic, and national identities? What factors shape the meaning and understandings of these identities? I argue that categorizing the Mexican experience within a strictly ethnic, or nationality, framework does not provide insight to how Mexican identity is understood and the deep meanings and attachments attributed to identity. White western definitions of identity are inadequate to understand what Mexican identity means. Mexican identity must be framed through individuals' experiences and understandings rooted within Mexican epistemology.

Participants' definitions demonstrate that there is no consensus as to whether Mexican is strictly a race, ethnicity, or nationality. There are no larger patterns as to how they define race with no clear distinction between Mexican as a race and Mexican as an ethnicity. Overall, race was not defined as a system of power dynamics. When discussing

their own lives, they shared similar experiences being racialized and marginalized in the United States. Through their experiences, they understood the privileges associated with whiteness and the power dynamics present in white spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The constructionist approach to racial and ethnic identity as outlined by Cornell and Hartman is a theoretical framework that considers the multiple contextual factors that shape identities. The constructionist approach builds on the circumstantialist approach, which argues that identities are exclusively dependent on context and social circumstances (Cornell and Hartman 2007). The constructionist approach also considers context as a major driving force in identity constructions, but also involves individuals as being part of construction and reconstruction. Identities are dependent on claims made by people outside the group and how individuals interpret those claims. The focus lies not just on interpretations of circumstances, but also attached history, culture, beliefs, and existing notions of other identities.

Racial identity formation follows a similar process where individuals negotiate social ascriptions, like race, through interactions with others and institutions. Individuals respond to the identities imposed on them by developing an understanding of their identity and how to navigate interactions (Vasquez 2011). Individuals begin to racially classify others and in the process define their own racial identities, which often happens subconsciously without being taught. Race then becomes a "common sense" approach to making sense of ones experiences, interactions, and surroundings (Omi and Winant 1994). Identities are greatly shaped by external forces, but it is also crucial to consider the individuals who play an active role in interpreting their surroundings and asserting

identities. Mexicans come to understand their identity through experiences within and outside of U.S. context and factors that strengthen the identity's importance. The racial and ethnic identity processes are similar in that identities gain meaning through interaction and interpretation. Ethnic and racial identity processes can be conflated and experienced as the same because they allow individuals to make sense of their own experiences and surroundings.

Cornell and Hartman (2007) draw on Appadurai (1990) and Griswold (1994)'s idea of constructed primoridialism that stems from subjective understandings of a shared identity. Attachment to identities goes beyond labels because they are experienced as profound and inherent bonds. Although primordial ties are experienced as shared blood ties or peoplehood, their significance lies in the power and meaning attributed to them, making them constructions and not fixed or inherent characteristics. Racial identities are also social realities that are experienced as "real and central social vessel[s] of group affiliation and life...(Bonilla-Silva 1999: 899)."

The perception that race and ethnicity overlap is not new, which is evident from the literature, but there is disagreement as to what level the two should be analyzed in unison. Bonilla-Silva distinguishes between race and ethnicity on the basis of how they emerged and continue to be constructed. Race is tied to power and hierarchical relations and serves as a mechanism for otherizing and excluding people while ethnicity can serve as a basis for group formation through shared culture and commonalities (Bonilla-Silva 1999). Racial structures are maintained through hierarchical relations and the perceived positions of different racialized groups. Vasquez (2011) makes the distinction as race being an imposed label from an outsider perspective and system for categorizing and

ethnicity as an identity that is asserted and meaningful. Cornell and Hartman (2007) establish race and ethnicity as separate identities that are not exclusive because perceptions of both often overlap. Maintaining the distinction between race and ethnicity is important due to the differences in how they have emerged, but for Mexicans and Latin@s, making that distinction is difficult as the boundaries between the two are often unclear. The broader debates claiming that Mexican is only an ethnicity overlooks how Mexicans are racialized into U.S. racial power structures.

Ferdman and Gallegos (2007) argue that there are important distinctions between race and ethnicity, but that it could be useful to have an ethnoracial framework when analyzing Latin@s given the intersectionality between race, ethnicity, and other identities. Employing an ethnoracial framework can be useful in interpreting how these two identities can be constructed similarly and ultimately experienced as the same. Mexican identity is an example of how the boundaries between race, ethnicity, and nationality can be blurred. Racialization stems from the historical and structural contexts communities are situated in, outside perceptions of those communities, and the racial elements attributed to them (Grosfoguel 2004). Vasquez (2011) also illustrates Latin@s as a racialized ethnicity because Latin@s, are often perceived as a racial group even if they are only listed as an ethnicity on the U.S. Census. The use of a racialized ethnicity indicates that Latin@s can belong to any racial group, but also demonstrates that those who identify as Latin@, or Mexican, have racialized experiences (Vasquez 2011). This framework points out that race and ethnicity can become conflated because the factors that shape ethnic identities also become the factors that shape racial identity.

Constructions of racial and ethnic categories are similar to constructs surrounding nation and nationalism because they are "imagined communities" based on ideas of shared history and peoplehood (Bonilla-Silva 1999). Nationalism is also a form of collective identity and belonging. Nationalism is often associated with political ideals, but can be established by making claims similar to that of ethnicity; shared culture and shared history within the nation (Cornell and Hartman 2007). The role of nation and nationality is interesting because it plays a role in shaping race and ethnicity even within United States context. As reported by other researchers (Ferdman and Gallegos 2001; Ortiz and Telles 2012; Rodríguez 2000) many Latin@s identify racially and ethnically in terms of nationality or national origin. Mexicans can identify as American or a United States citizen, but that does not indicate that attachments to country of origin cease shaping perceptions of identity. Understandings of race and ethnicity differ in Mexico and if they continue to shape identity within the U.S., the factors that shape identity are then rooted beyond citizenship and territorial ties.

Connor (1994) explains that defining nation can be difficult because the "essence" of a nation is comprised by the common ideologies, collective histories, and memories that connect people together. Nationalism is thus shaped by cultural and symbolic components – ideologies, values, traditions, and memories – rather than demographic components, although there can be a sense of belonging to a specific territory. Cultural elements can be continuous, meaning that they can be handed down through generations while still holding meaning (Smith 1999). This form of cultural nationalism focuses more on culture as the basis for collective identity and community rather than political or economic factors (Omi and Winant 1994).

Ferdman and Gallegos (2012) and Rodríguez (2000) touch base on perceptions of race in Latin American countries, which could influence perceptions of race within U.S. context. Latin American countries view race as more of a fluid spectrum rather than a racial binary that is common to the United States. Preexisting understandings of race can vary from country to country allowing individuals to construct their identities outside of U.S. categories. Ortiz and Telles (2012) categorize Mexican racial identity as a spectrum of skin colors with a racial composition ranging from European, Indigenous, and African ancestry. Villarreal (2010) furthers the analysis of the racial identity through a study demonstrating that although Mexico's census does not have a system of racial categorization stratification on the basis of race still exists. The primary racial distinctions are not spectrum based, but cultural differences between indigenous and mestiz@ communities. Even these distinctions are not characterized in racial terms through government data rather through cultural and language differences (Villarreal 2010). Differences in how race and ethnicity are conceptualized contribute to the gap in how individuals understand their own identities and how they attempt to make sense of rigid categories that do not exist in Mexico. The racial status of Mexicans in the U.S., however, has also been ambiguous because historically Mexicans have been characterized as racially Mexican, white, other, and currently being able to belong to any race. Categorization can be an issue because there exists a discordance between how people self-identify regardless of categories and how they can identify according to U.S. racial categories.

METHODS

I conducted 13 interviews in Spanish, English, and a combination of both. The interviews were conducted in private and semi-private locations and took between 30 minutes and 1 hour to complete. The main criterion for determining participants was people who were over the age of 18 and self-identified as Mexican. I contacted people who I already knew would fit my criteria and also asked them to refer me to others who would be interested in participating. I sent emails to Latin@ student organizations on college campuses and community organizations that serve the Latin@ community. I explained the purpose of my research and asked those that were interested to contact me.

The majority of my respondents had some level of college education and many were currently in college. I was not interested in whether participants were born in the United States or in another country because I did not want to know information regarding citizenship status or exclude those who have lived in the United States for the majority of their life. Being born and/or raised in the United States or another country could be shape racial, ethnic, and national identities and, although participants did choose to share that information with me, I did not explicitly ask questions about country of origin, nationality, or citizenship.

I did not define the terms ethnicity, race, or nationality for participants because I was interested in how participants perceived the terms and wanted to avoid imposing my opinions or definitions stated in the literature. I asked participants various open ended questions about their racial and ethnic identities and the factors that shaped their understandings of those identities.

Negotiating my position as both an insider and outsider in the Mexican community was difficult during the course of the project. The very questions I asked my participants are ones I continuously grapple with. During interviews it was difficult to refrain from wanting to share my own experiences and understandings of my Mexican identity and relate them to those of my participants. I struggled throughout the analysis because my participants' responses are powerful narratives in and of themselves. Although it was necessary to cut down and pull apart aspects of their experiences to reveal broader patterns and complexities that go into understanding Mexican identity, there was great value in participants' diverse experiences. There is not one way to be Mexican, there is not one definition of what Mexican means, and participants' narratives demonstrate that the terminology, concepts, and categorizations used to talk about identities do not always translate into lived experience. The literature makes certain claims, but experience is powerful and should not be invalidated when it does not fit into concepts created by others. Yes, identities are social constructions, but that is not how they are lived out. The experiences and narratives outlined in my study are not representative of all Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, people of Mexican heritage or descent, Chican@s, or Latin@s, but highlight diversity and break down boundaries set up by the U.S. census for what Mexican means.

FINDINGS

Racial and ethnic identities are understood differently in the U.S. and Mexico, creating a disconnect between self-identification and categorization through U.S. racial constructs.The meaning behind Mexican identity was most often described through

cultural factors and notions of shared experience, but identities are experienced much deeper than labels. Identities are forces that organize daily life and attachments to community. Race, ethnicity, and nationality are often separated in frameworks for analyzing identities, but there are benefits to understanding how they interact, overlap, and often get conflated when experienced in everyday life. For respondents, there was no clear definition or distinction in terminology, but they experienced racialization and discrimination.

Understanding Race within Mexican and U.S. Context

Among the participants Mexican identity is primarily understood through a cultural lens rather than a racial one, which could then indicate that Mexican is an ethnicity. However, when participants were asked about their racial identities independent of U.S. census categories, the majority asserted Mexican, Latin@, or Hispanic, meaning that they use terms generally considered ethnic labels to also describe their race. Race in Mexico is not understood through the rigid racial hierarchy present in the United States, but within U.S. context cultural experiences become part of both racial and ethnic identity processes because Mexicans, and also Latin@s, are racialized as a distinct racial group (Vasquez 2011). Racial categories are not necessarily involved in attaching meaning to identity in Mexico because distinct races are not acknowledged. In the U.S., certain ethnic identities become racialized because individuals are forced to place themselves in categories.

Throughout interviews, respondents made references to mestizaje, demonstrating that race is not conceptualized through categories. One respondent believed skin color to

be a characteristic particular to Mexicans, "...like I said, not precisely white or black although there are extreme cases of course, but definitely skin color." This response was not necessarily framed in terms of European, Indigenous, and African, but as Mexicans having brown skin and brown being part of a spectrum between the U.S. categories of white and black. Another respondent explicitly referenced racial mixing among Latin@s characterizing it as "...immersion with different races" and that "mestizo would be the race that Latin@s participate in or are a part of." Another respondent from Mexico stated, "there's Mexicans who are more pure, more pure racially where they come from a pure indigenous race and these that are a mix of races, but I think the majority of people today are a mixture." The emphasis on mestizaje reflected the nationalist discourses in post-revolutionary Mexico, which may not be a direct factor in how participants understand their identities, but does demonstrate that mestizaje is tied to shared history and shapes how racial and ethnic differences are conceptualized (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Smith 1999).

The majority of respondents agreed that Mexican was not an all-encompassing race, but differed in how they interpreted those racial differences. Some respondents explained diversity using racial terms in Mexico for example, "There's a lot of people in Mexico, we're very diverse. There's people who are indigenous, people of European, Spanish origins, there's combinations like mestizos" and there were responses explaining those differences through U.S. racial categories explaining that Mexicans can identify with white, Native American, and Africa American. Although the terms for explaining racial differences among Mexicans differ, the idea behind them is that there can be diversity in complexions (Ferdman and Gallegos 2012). Racial identity among Mexicans, either in the U.S. or Mexico, was not discussed in terms of rigid categories. Regardless of

the racial terminology used, participants conceptualized race as fluid and based on complexion, which reflects the lack of rigid racial categories in Mexico.

The diversity and fluidity behind Mexican racial identity affect how Mexicans understand race and attempt to situate themselves within the rigid U.S. structure. Respondents interpreted their racial identities in terms of skin color or heritage, neither of which can neatly be placed within existing categories. In terms of race, there was a disconnect between respondents' self-identification and which racial categories they chose to identify with. Confusion when answering questions about race adds to the validity in Ferdman and Gallego's (2007) analysis in that race is understood and constructed differently in Latin America. As mentioned earlier, when asked to self-identify, many respondents stated Mexican, Latin@, or Hispanic, none of which are recognized as races. Then when asked how they navigate racial categories, they usually could not identify in the same manner and used white, other, or no response to characterize their race.

Some respondents explained the broader idea of mestizaje through U.S. categories situating Mexicans somewhere between Black, white, or Native American. Other respondents attempted to understand U.S. categories as a spectrum where white represented a skin tone rather than a white race. For those born in Mexico, Mexican was a national identity, not a racial one, but explained their race by situating themselves within the color spectrum.

Meanings and Attachment to "Mexicanness"

The meaning behind Mexican identity was most often described through cultural aspects that also formed the basis for belonging and sense of shared history. Attachments to identity are fueled through bonds to culture and peoplehood. These bonds remain strong regardless of national context.

Establishing ties: culture and values

Symbolic repertories are defined as the stories, histories, rituals, and cultural practices that shape the importance of identities and become a form of differentiating one's community from others (Cornell and Hartman 2007). The majority of respondents identified various cultural elements such as food, music, celebrations, Catholic rituals as traditions, jokes and sayings, and language as the main factors that shaped their identity. Respondents also mentioned that family was also an important factor in transmitting cultural practices, but the value placed on family was seen as something specific to Mexicans. As one respondent stated, "I've noticed that in many countries family is not the center of attention or life you know, sort of like parents do their own thing, children grow up and do their own thing, they leave home, things like that, but in Mexico that's not so." The importance of family fits with Ferdman and Gallego's (2001) study on Latin@ identity where parents and family are the initial sources for influencing identity, defining what constitutes group belonging, and transmitting messages about how one's group relates to others. These responses are consistent across the board regardless of where the participants were born or their age. The consistency in responses demonstrates that these elements are important when defining some of the factors behind identifying as Mexican and that these elements do transcend borders.

Beyond labels: identities rooted in a shared history

Throughout interviews, respondents often referred to their Mexican identity as part of a larger history by referring to their Mexican roots and Mexican blood, a "state of soul" as Anzaldúa states. As one participant stated, "Although many [Mexicans] have become U.S. nationals due to immigration from Mexico to the U.S. and when they come here, their nationality changes, but their roots stay the same." Having unchangeable roots demonstrates that change in context does not change ones ancestors and ties to culture and nation. Another respondent also perceived their identity to be rooted in a shared history by stating that "I think...our physical traits kind of distinguish you apart and I've never rejected the idea that I am because I am and I'm proud of it..." These statements demonstrate that respondents' Mexican identity is understood as inherent physical characteristics and ancestral ties (Cornell and Hartman 2007).

Ancestral ties add to the notion that culture and physical characteristics are transmitted through generations. One respondent attributed food making as something stemming from ancestors, "our ancestors used to make [tamales] on corn husks and that's a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation." Culture is important in defining ones' identity and attributing meaning to something that has been maintained for so long, which demonstrates the participant's commitment to sustain those practices.

That same respondent was born in Mexico, but became a naturalized U.S. citizen. They believed that their roots and ties to Mexico could never be changed or forgotten

because they are ingrained in every aspect of their being.[2] When asked how the participant came to understand their Mexican identity, they responded:

> ...Through my lived experiences and more here in the U.S. because you miss the place you were born in. You miss your roots and you never forget them even if you live outside for many years, you bring a piece of your country to live with you and you continue loving the place you were born in and the people with whom you interacted with as a child and you grow. They're places that are always inside you in your skin, in your heart, in your thoughts and that's how you maintain that image and you never forget it...you don't lose your roots no matter where you live, even in another country.

The participant's response also demonstrates that emotions are an important aspect that bind individuals to their identity and provoke a sense of pride and connection to a larger community and history. This participant's understanding of their identity reinforces Anzaldúas understanding of Mexican identity as fluid and free of geographic constraints. Identities may be social constructions, but from an experiential level they are a social reality (Bonilla-Silva 1999). Cultural ties and shared histories evoke a strong sense of pride for participants because they are the sources of attachment and social organization.

Nationality and identity beyond borders

Nationality was the term that was most easily defined and most straightforward in how people understood its meaning. Respondents associated nationality with nation, citizenship, political ties, and country of origin. Although Mexican nationality was a more concrete concept for participants than Mexican race and Mexican ethnicity, responses reveal complex notions of nationality and ties to nation, which do not necessarily indicate citizenship. According to Bonilla-Silva (1999) and Smith (1999), nationalism is shaped by cultural factors like shared ideologies, values, and traditions and in turn creates the notion of shared history and shared peoplehood.

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[2] I use 'they' and 'their' as singular pronouns to represent gender neutrality and inclusivity.

Ties to Mexico are more commonly described through cultural aspects rather than aspects commonly attached to citizenship such as civic and political involvement in Mexico. Attachments to culture, rituals, and notions of shared history are experienced by respondents regardless of their country of origin or their reasons for currently residing in the U.S. Only one respondent from Mexico stated having a "moral, social, and civic duty" to be involved politically in Mexico is a way to reclaim and maintain their national identity.

Ties to Mexico are not only reserved for those we were born in Mexico. Some U.S.-born respondents also expressed having ties to Mexico as a nation. A participant born in the U.S. felt connected to Mexico stating that "I have specific ties [to the U.S.] because of the culture, it's part of me now, but at the same time I have ties to I guess the motherland, Mexico, because of my family and how they've raised me within the United States." In this case, ties to nation are not necessarily defined through citizenship or nationality, which complicates understandings of what a nation is and what it represents. Connor outlines the difficulty in defining nation because the "essence" of nations are made up of the connections, ideologies and culture that bind people together. Nation and nationalism are thus intangible concepts that do not have to be confined within certain borders.

Within this discussion on nation and nationality comes the question of U.S. citizenship and what it means to have been born within certain territorial boundaries. Two participants who were born in the U.S. did not identify as "American" and instead mentioned having strong ties to Mexico, even if not through citizenship. The first respondent states, "even though I was born here in the U.S. I always say I'm Mexican

and even though I wasn't born [in Mexico], I have no citizenship there that's where I feel it is..." Similarly, the second respondent mentions:

> I see my race as my culture and the same culture that is on this side of the river is on the other side of the river, so I don't see any difference in it...I have more cultural ties [to Mexico]. What cultural ties do I have to the United States? There's pop culture, but there's not a culture that I was born and raised with. It can never be taken out of me.

The participants demonstrate that nationality is not perceived to be linked with citizenship and more so to culture, nation, and family. Ties to nation do not indicate ties to a specific territory, but the deeper connections to a shared peoplehood (Connor 1994). Another respondent who was born in Mexico made a distinction between Mexicans born in Mexico and those in the U.S, but explained that nationality does not dictate racial or ethnic identity. The participant was asked about differences among Mexicans based on country of birth:

> I would say they have Mexican ancestry, but they were born here and they are American. I like when they identify as Mexican because I think it's a strong culture rooted in our traditions and I love it when mothers make that distinction like "you have Mexican blood." However, one can't choose where to be born...but we can identify with different groups despite being born in a country that wasn't our ancestors'.

The participant equates "American" to citizenship and having been born in the U.S., but also states that Mexican identity transcends borders. Mexicanness is not perceived as being passed down through citizenship, but through culture. Family is important in transmitting cultural identity, as mentioned by the participant, but choosing to assert a Mexican identity despite being born in the U.S. reinforces the strength behind traditions and values. Commonalities and shared experiences extend beyond territories and identifying as Mexican, or Mexican-American, is shaped by ties to nation (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Connor 1994; Smith 1999).

Classifying Mexican as a Race and/or Ethnicity

Participants were asked to define the terms "race" and "ethnicity" before being asked about their own racial and ethnic identities. There were no broader patterns as to how these terms were defined or understood and the majority of respondents did not define race in relation to power structures or associate race with discrimination. However, when participants spoke about their experiences with discrimination, they understood race as being rooted in oppression, marginalization, and privilege.

Defining race and ethnicity

Much of the literature on race and ethnicity would classify Mexican as an ethnicity or nationality, but not as a race. The literature that specifically focused on Mexican identity also focused on Mexican as an ethnicity (Arredondo et al. 1999; Ferdman and Gallegos 2001). However, the study by Ortiz and Telles analyzed individuals' racial identities to better understand the debate as to whether Mexican is a racial category and if Mexicans are white or non-white (Ortiz and Telles 2012). The literature makes clear distinctions between race and ethnicity, but it is not an easy distinction to make when analyzing how racial and ethnic identities are actually understood and played out in everyday life. Ferdman and Gallegos outline the diversity and complexity in understanding Latin@ identity, which also applies to the ambiguity behind definitions of Mexican in terms of race and ethnicity:

> Our answers are not always satisfactory because they may not fit an expected form. We have found this challenging, because our experience of Latinos as a group is of a multifaceted, dynamic, complex, and very heterogeneous people for whom simple answers are never sufficient. The difficulty we often face is that to facilitate comprehension we must gloss over the more complex aspects of our understanding or describe the Latino experience in the context of constructs and

> frameworks that do not necessarily fit and that were generated by the experience and perspectives of other groups (Ferdman and Gallegos 2001: 33).

Similarly, when participants were asked to define the terms race and ethnicity, there was a wide range of responses, but there were common themes that came up in their responses including: phenotype, culture, environment, language, and group for identifying oneself. These themes can be separated as belonging to either race or ethnicity, but some definitions were similar for both terms or defined in relation to each other. One respondent, for example, defined race, and later ethnicity, as "a community, like a group you identify yourself with although it's based on physical traits mostly. I also feel like there's an aspect of culture in it definitely. So I pretty much differentiate between culture and race. In a sense, culture defines race to me." This explanation of race is rooted in Mexican epistemology where cultural differences are attributed to indigenous and Mestiz@ communities. For others, ethnicity was a "subgroup of race."

There were no broader patterns in participants' responses regarding the definitions of race and ethnicity, but it is important to note that the majority of respondents did not refer to power structures or imposed labels. However, that does not mean that those power dynamics are not present in participants' experiences or that their understandings of race are not framed through systems of oppression. Theoretical frameworks that explore Mexican identity as an ethnicity or nationality overlook the racial aspect of Mexican identity that was present in participants' experiences. For most respondents, their Mexican identity invoked a sense of pride due to positive experiences surrounding culture, family, and community. Understandings of their racial identities were not tied to oppression, but their racialized experiences were marked by marginalization and awareness of whiteness as a form of privilege.

Whiteness as privilege

After asking participants to define the terms, race, ethnicity, and nationality, I asked about their racial and ethnic identities. Just as the wide range of definitions did not necessarily match the accepted definitions of race and ethnicity, responses for self-identification did not fall under the common understandings of Mexicans as being of any racial category and Mexican as strictly an ethnicity, or nationality. A few participants did mention that their race was white and their ethnicity as Mexican, Latin@, or Hispanic. The majority of participants used Mexican, Mexican-American, Indigenous, Mestiz@, Latin@, Chican@, Hispanic, or some combination to identify themselves racially and ethnically. The most common responses included Mexican, Latin@, and Hispanic for both race and ethnicity. Based on responses and understandings of race and ethnicity from the perspective of the individuals interviewed, there was no clear distinction between Mexican as a race and Mexican as an ethnicity meaning that there were no patterns in responses.

Some participants used the white racial category to self-identify while others challenged the idea that Mexicans could be considered white. A participant born in Mexico identified as white within U.S. racial categories because they had fair skin and were often labeled non-Mexican.

> I identify with whites, but not American whites, with mestizos...but it's difficult when I get asked that because my skin color is white, but I don't feel white American...the rich mixture in Mexico creates diversity. I would like to have darker skin, for example, to be able to identify more with indigenous Mexicans and my skin is white, so sometimes people don't believe me when I say I'm Mexican and I get offended.

The participant made a clear distinction between "American" whites and having a lighter complexion. The U.S. white racial category is intended to encompass the white race and

not a point within a spectrum, but the participant understood race through a different lens. Other respondents who were born in the U.S. also checked the white box, but were uncertain as to why. One respondent stated, "I guess for race I'm technically white. The census would say I'm white, but for ethnicity I'm Mexican" while another respondent also felt that they could check the white category, even if it was not how they wanted to identify, "I realized I always fit into the white category, but I never thought of myself as that way, I always left it blank. I always put it as non- white, but technically I do fit the category. I don't know, if there was a brown box I would fill that out." The respondents felt like they could "technically" fit into the white category, but their uncertainty demonstrated that that is not how they would necessarily choose to self-identify. Respondents were unclear as to how they could identify on the census due to the ambiguity of the categories presented, especially the meaning of white. Except for one participant, those who identified as white on the census did not identify as white when asked about their identities outside of categories and U.S. constructions.

Lastly, two participants who were born in the U.S. challenged and rejected the idea that Mexicans would be classified as white. One respondent stated that their identity did not reflect whiteness:

> The government is telling me I'm something different and you know, when I talk...about being Mexican and my identity I share with [people] how all these experiences I've had with the police and language and how other people are discriminated and the government tells me that I'm white, none of these experiences have told me I'm white, so there's a conflict there.

Similarly, another respondent challenged the fact that their identity as racially Mexican and Latin@ was only acknowledged as an ethnicity, "I guess it isn't fair...you exclude us and now you want to you know, put us in the same box as you and it doesn't make sense

to me and so, I mean, I just kinda wish I had my own box, but sometimes you're like 'why do we have our own separate box away from everyone?'" Both of these examples demonstrate that the white category within the U.S. context was associated with whiteness and the white majority, not just a skin tone. The participants rejected a racially white identity because their experiences within the U.S. were marked by marginalization and exclusion. The white category on the census was not simply defined as having a lighter complexion, but also defined by the privileges that accompany whiteness. How these participants understood race was a reflection of power dynamics, histories of oppression and Mexicans being otherized when compared to whites (Bonilla-Silva 1999).

Some participants had experiences being labeled white due to perceived privileges. Two respondents shared similar experiences of being called white. One respondent stated that their friends in the U.S. jokingly called her "white," "when I'm with certain people like my friends will be like 'oh, you're so white you're not really Mexican'...It's really hard sometimes, but I still strongly identify as Mexican." Similarly, another respondent experienced being labeled white in Mexico, "when I have gone to Mexico they always call me gringa, like girl from the other side of the border...they'd be like 'oh, you're not really Mexican' and then coming [to college] people won't let me forget it" and later stated, "people sometimes confuse me as white, but I don't look white...I don't think I present in that way." Both of these experiences reveal that both participants were labeled white not due to race or skin color, but because they were perceived to have privileges associated with whiteness, like living in the United States or being in college. Both participants also asserted that they were not white because their experiences did not reflect others' perceptions. This conflict between outside perceptions

and lived experiences is especially highlighted in the second participant's response where they felt marginalized and stereotyped at a primarily white college.

Another respondent also associated whiteness with privilege particularly in their college setting. When the participant talked about some of the struggles they faced navigating college they stated, "I'm a Latina, I'm not only a girl or a student of color, I'm first generation and I'm not white, I'm Mexican." The respondent stated their most salient identities when in school, but also made it clear that they were not white; their experiences as a first generation Mexican student were not the same as those of privileged white students. The participant rejects whiteness in her statement because they have come to understand their college experience through the higher education system that has institutionally been established to privileged whites.

Facing discrimination and stereotypes

I asked participants about their experiences with discrimination and occasions where they were made to feel uncomfortable due to their identities. The majority of respondents spoke about feeling marginalized and experiencing racism in primarily white spaces. The majority of respondents identified experiences with some form of discrimination – racial microagressions, being stereotyped, discrimination in school and workplace, police profiling, and/or feeling tokenized. Respondents who shared their experiences also attributed their marginalization to white people. For some participants, these experiences contributed to their discomfort expressing their Mexican identity and having others make assumptions about them. One participant stated, "I feel less comfortable when I'm in a space where people already have a perceived idea of what

being Mexican means," which they explained as usually happening when around white people.

Other participants also spoke about experiences where white people made stereotypical assumptions about Mexicans, adding to their understandings of race as a system rooted in oppression. One respondent reflected on how others degrade Mexicans due to stereotypes:

> I don't think I feel so comfortable telling white people or like in my classrooms that I'm Mexican because...Mexican is such a, it's sometimes treated like such a dirty word...I'm not saying this is exclusive to white people, but I know that there's so many misconceptions about Mexico and it's like a squalor thing...I hesitate saying I'm Mexican and instead say I'm Hispanic because I know they'll have those types of images in their mind...

The participant felt less comfortable expressing their Mexican identity in white spaces due to others' negative associations with Mexico and viewing Mexicans as inferior. The participant themself did not see Mexican as a "dirty word," but indicating that the stereotypes are a "squalor thing" highlights their awareness about race and racism. They also mentioned asserting a Latin@ identity rather than Mexican to avoid judgment or being labeled by white people.

Some participants responded to stereotypes by combating those assumptions and proving them wrong. One respondent reflected on their experiences growing up with immigrant parents and how their family was discriminated and looked down on due to country of origin and language barriers. The respondent stated that they became aware of racism at an early age, "I've always felt like I've had to prove myself or I've always had to like, do better than what other people thought because of the way they looked at my family and so I needed to break that barrier." Other participants spoke about stereotypes

in a similar manner in that they felt they had to prove others wrong and work to fight the stereotypes often reproduced by whites.

Understandings of racism and racial hierarchies were not evident when participants were asked to define the meaning of race and ethnicity, but based on their experiences, it is clear that they are fully aware of the power dynamics at play and the ways in which they are racialized, primarily in white spaces. Participants associated whiteness with privilege and asserted that their experiences marked by marginalization were far from the experiences of whites.

CONCLUSIONS

When participants discussed their racial identities, they were not understood or explained through racial categories under U.S. constructs because ideas surrounding race and ethnicity are not universal. It may be useful to organize identities through categories and theoretical frameworks to point out broader patterns, but to really understand identities, it must be acknowledged that experiences under one identity are not homogenous. It is important to probe deeper and take peoples' voices as representative for their own experiences. Participants identified as Mexican, but their racial and ethnic identities were shaped by distinct experiences.

Ideas about race, ethnicity, and nation within the U.S. context are influenced by how these concepts are understood in different cultures and across countries. How individuals understand their racial and ethnic identities did not translate as easily when they attempted to make sense of categories that do not capture their experiences or how they self-identify. It is clear that U.S. census categories are ambiguous, which was

reflected in participants' discussions on their racial identities and how they made sense of rigid racial categories. Participants demonstrated diverse experiences and understandings of racial categories, but there was a consensus that these categories were also incomprehensible.

Mexican identity was accompanied by a strong sense of belonging and meaning on the basis of shared values, traditions, and peoplehood. Participants' responses, regardless of country of origin, were consistent in terms of what their Mexican identity meant to them and the factors that shaped their experiences as Mexicans.

Mexican identity cannot fully be understood when framed as solely an ethnicity because participants shared experiences being racialized in the United States. Although there were no clear distinctions between definitions for race and ethnicity or descriptions of race as stemming from histories of oppression, participants' experiences demonstrated otherwise. "White" was not just a skin tone within a spectrum, but an indicator of privilege. Participants described their experiences with discrimination through an understanding of race as an oppressive system.

Participants encountered marginalization not just through interactions, but also by not having agency over their racial and ethnic identities through ambiguous and misrepresenting census categories. It is important to understand this identity through a Mexican epistemology and acknowledge that individuals have the power to define their own identities independent of white western notions of what Mexican identity means.

Further research can touch on how intersecting identities shape Mexicanness along the lines of class, gender, and sexuality. For participants, being Mexican was not always their singular most salient identity and other identities can have an impact on

racial and ethnic experiences. Identities are not static and their salience often depends on context, so individuals must often negotiate their multiple identities within different spaces. There could be larger patterns as to situations and spaces where Mexican identity becomes more or less salient. Regional differences can also play a role in shaping identity because certain areas of the United States have a greater Mexican cultural influence than others. I did not ask participants about country of birth or length of time residing in the U.S., but there could be additional generational differences in the meanings behind this identity. Responses could differ among individuals who have been in the United States for multiple generations, those who have recently immigrated, and those who maintain transnational ties.

The ways in which racial and ethnic data is collected in the U.S. does not represent people whose understandings of these categories are influenced by constructions outside of U.S. context. The literature on race and ethnicity needs to acknowledge that individuals are active participants in creating meaning behind their identities and defining what race, ethnicity, and nationality mean for them. Literature analyzes these identities by assuming how they apply to different communities, which creates disconnects between how these topics are discussed and conceptualized and how they are lived out. Employing a racialized ethnicity framework could make sense of how Mexicans are racialized within the U.S. contributing to the disconnect in how they identify and are perceived by others and the options for identifying through census categories. The disconnect may hold broader potential impacts for how information is collected and interpreted because as one respondent pointed out, "if you don't check anything we get missed as well, so then I think numbers are important for resources."

Having a better sense of Mexican and Latin@ populations is important for meeting the needs of the Mexican community and providing culturally relevant resources.

Understanding what it means to be Mexican is not about categorizing identities and dictating whether Mexican is a race, ethnicity, or nationality, but to understand how people's experiences reinforce the realness and salience behind racial and ethnic identities. Identities are not just mere labels; they are bonds to culture, community, and shared histories.

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